

Voter's turnout and participation of women during elections in Nagaland: An Analysis

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p><i>Received: 29 May 2022;</i> <i>Received in revised form: 21 Jun 2022;</i> <i>Accepted: 25 Jun 2022;</i> <i>Available online: 30 Jun 2022</i></p> <p>©2022 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Voters' Turnout, Election Malpractices, Proxy Voting, Women Representation, Barriers</p>	<p>Free and fair election is one of the vital features to indicate the state of democracy of any nation. It allows citizens to select their leaders to work for their welfare. The Nagas initially rejected the electoral system offered by Indian states and boycotted the 1952 and 1957 general elections due to their demand for the right to self-determination based on their distinct and unique culture and history and their indifference with the Indian independence movement. The granting of statehood on December 1, 1963, paved the way for the election process in the state. It held the first State Assembly election in January 1964. Since then, the election has been a regular feature of Nagaland politics. Nagaland's election was notable for two factors: its high voter turnout compared to other Indian states and the participation of women voters. This paper will highlight some of the reason that has led to high voter turnout and the reason for no female representation despite high female participation as voters during the election.</p>

1. Introduction

According to the perceived wisdom of liberal democratic theory, elections constitute an essential element in the democratic process. Citizens can directly participate in the political process, choose their leaders, and voice their policy views. Elections thus legitimise the power of governments and appoint representatives to them. It is considered that no political system can be really democratic unless it has regular and free elections. (Joseph & Mahajan 1991). The Indian government since its independence has been conducting election all over the country, enabling the citizens to participate in the selection of their representatives who will work for the welfare of the people and the nation as a whole. Before the granting of statehood, Nagas initially rejected the electoral system offered by Indian state and boycotted the 1952 and 1957 general elections due to their demand for right to self-determination based on their distinct and unique culture, history and their indifference with the Indian independence movement. But after a period of negotiation between the Naga leaders and Indian government led to the

formation of Nagaland as a separate state in the Indian Union on December 1, 1963, which paved the way for election process. Subsequently the State held its first State Assembly election in January 1964. Since then, election has been a regular feature of Nagaland politics. The two prominent features of the election are the high voter turnout and high polling percentage of female voters.

Higher voter turnout during elections is usually seen as a sign of peoples' willingness to participate in the election process. The voters' turnout in Nagaland since the first Nagaland Legislative Assembly held in 1964 has exceeded the levels, which is typical in several advanced democracies (Fig. 1). Further compared with other states, the voter turnout was at the higher side in every general election (Fig 2). Looking at the percentage of voters' participation during election, one might assume a high level of responsibility and enthusiasm to exercise their voting rights and elect a government of their choice. However, the ground reality provides a different assumption. Several malpractices are the causes of such high voters turnout. Such malpractices has been

the root cause because of which democratic norms have been undermined, and acting as a significant determinants for democratic principles taking its

roots in Nagaland. The principles of democracy were compromised to suit the nature of the Naga society.

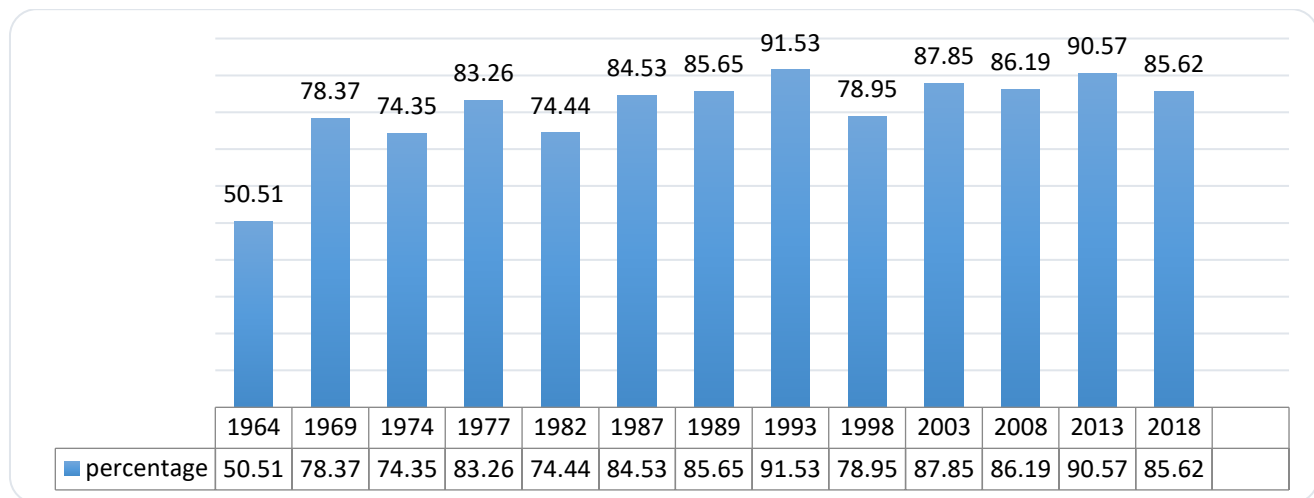


Fig 1. Percentage of voter's turnout in Nagaland Assembly election 1964-2018

Source: Election commission of India

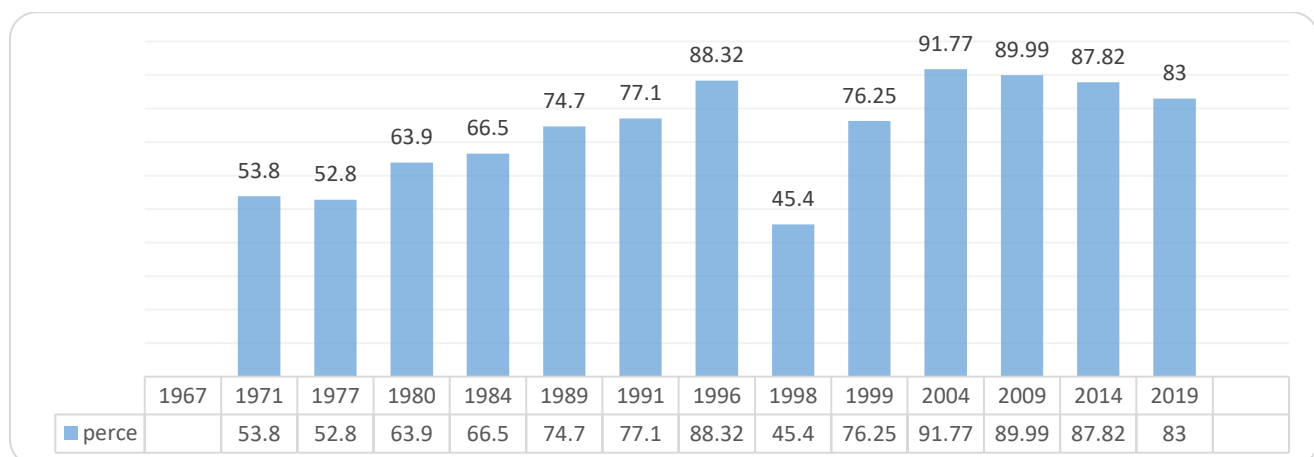


Fig 2. Percentage of Voters Turnout in General Election from 1967-2019

* In 1967 Nagaland National Organisation (NNO) candidate won the election uncontested

Source: Election commission of India

Some of the determinants for the high voter turnout are:

Proxy voting: The proxy voting system is legally practiced in the United Kingdom election for a long period. Proxy voting means that if voters cannot cast their vote in person, they can have someone they trust to cast their vote legally on their behalf. Proxy voters can either go to the polling station to cast vote or apply to vote by post (Electoral Commission UK). If you are away from your constituency on election day, have a medical condition or handicap, or are

unable to vote in person due to employment or military service, one can apply for a proxy vote (<https://www.gov.uk/how-to-vote/voting-by-proxy> nd). However, unlike in the UK, proxy voting in Nagaland takes place against the election norms. The party and candidates use illegal means to procure the voter's card and vote on their behalf in favour of a particular candidate to win the election. In fact, proxy voting during election in Nagaland has become a norm rather than an exception during state and general elections in Nagaland.

Booth capturing: It is a form of tampering with the election process in which members of a political party occupy a polling station, excluding and voting in place of individuals who are registered to vote there. This menace of illegal electoral practice by supporters of a particular candidate is also a reason for the higher voting percentage in Nagaland. The Election Commission of India no doubt has taken up several measures to improve the electoral process to make it a free and fair election. It has taken steps like introduction EVM to prevent booth capturing, installation of CCTV, providing security, etc. However, even with such arrangements in majority of the cases, booth capturing has taken place¹.

Head of the family casting for their entire family: Universal Adult Franchise based on the principle of one-person one-vote allows voter to exercise their political rights and decide for himself or herself who she/he wants to vote. However, voters, candidates, or parties in most cases hardly make an effort to uphold this principle. Instead, there is the popular practice of one person voting for their entire family. Unfortunately, polling agents, election staffs, and candidates all support the practise of one individual voting for their entire family.

Entire village voting for one candidate: According to the 2011 census 70% of the population of Nagaland still resides in the villages thus they constitute more than 2/3 of voters. One peculiar feature of voting in the village is that there is a tendency for the villagers to vote for one candidate entirely. In most elections, pre-arrangement is made between the candidates and villagers. Because of such understanding, few selected people cast the vote on behalf of the entire villagers.

Bogus electoral roll: Another factor that accounted for high voters' turnout can be cited to bogus electoral roll. There is a norm in Nagaland where there is large registration of bogus voters, and it is over this bogus voter, which the candidates fight over for proxy voting. Thus, in a sense, the bogus voters become a crucial factor in the election where there is a close contest.

Spoils system: A spoil system is a process in which a political party provides government civil service employment to followers, friends, and relatives after winning an election as a reward for helping them win (<https://educalingo.com/en/dic-en/spoils-system>)

¹For instance in 2018 Nagaland State Assembly election through eyewitness and polling agents account, there were several unreported incidents of booth capturing

n.d). In the case of Nagaland, also, election provides an opportunity and incentive work towards the victory of a particular candidate in return for jobs and other benefits. Unlike large segments of India, particularly in the urban centers, which have reaped the fruits of liberalisation, the Northeast has remained in the throes of civil strife, violence, economic blockades, and corruption. Akin to the other Frontier regions like Ladakh, the Northeast has more or less remained insulated from the economic benefits of liberalisation. Thus, the government remains the biggest employer in the region. Participation in the political process, therefore, is critical to preserve and maintain such economic opportunities. (Rinchen Norbu Wangchuk 2018)

Insurgent movement and electoral politics: The involvement of the various insurgent groups of North East states especially in the state of Manipur and Nagaland is an open secret². Political parties have established a substantial nexus with many of the insurgent groups. Candidates use these groups in order to influence the voters to vote in their favour. More than pursuing the voters to vote for a particular party based on the cause for which they are fighting, insurgent groups adopt intimidation tactics to influence the voters to cast their ballot in favour of their preferred political party. However, the questions always remain whether the involvement of insurgent group is one determinants for higher voter's turnout? It is hard to say. In this regard Rinchen Norbu Wangchuk (2018) is of the opinion that high turnout and pro-incumbency bias do point towards that direction.

The undemocratic practice that has been highlighted has become synonymous with election in Nagaland and are the main determinants for the high voter turnout during elections in Nagaland. In light of this, comparing high voter participation with a successful democratic exercise in Nagaland would be incorrect.

2. Political participation of Women

The participation of women and their engagement in the electoral process is an important marker of the maturity of democracy in any country. It can be defined in terms of not only the equality and freedom with which they share power with men but also in terms of the liberty and space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics(

²Statement is based on interview with politicians, party workers and political analyst and based on personal observation

Praven Rai 2011:47). The political participation of women in Nagaland has been a major topic of discussion, especially among academicians, researchers, and scholars. Women in Nagaland constitute half of the total population and election data reveals that the voter turnout percentage³among women voters is equivalent to men. In fact that they have outnumbered male voters in the 2018 State Assembly Election, (fig 3). They remain, nevertheless, on the fringe of representative democracy. Democracy is founded on the idea that all people have the right to participate in the management of political matters, and that each citizen's contribution is equally valuable, but in the case of political representation of women, Nagaland presents a very grim picture and they have been segregated to

secondary status. Though they constitute equal vote banks and records high polling percentage⁴ than men voters in most of the elections (Fig 4) they have failed to evolve an autonomous political identity. They have been unable to develop an own political identity. Only as voters have they been able to gain political visibility. There has never been a woman elected to the state legislature in Nagaland's election history, which spans more than five decade (fig 5) with the exception of Rano M.Shaiza, the lone elected women to the Lok Sabha in 1997 from United Democratic Party (Amer2014) and S Phangnon Konyak first elected women to the Rajya Sabha in 2022 (Nagaland: BJP gets its first woman Rajya Sabha, 2022)

³The proportion of eligible voters who vote in an election is known as voter turnout.

⁴Polling percentage means number of person voting against number of voters registered

Year	Voters			Voters who voted			Polling percentage		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	W	T
1964	124166	0	124166	41331	21388	124166	33.29	NA	50.51
1969	93829	83102	176931	72196	66907	139103	76.47	80.51	78.61
1974	221223	173847	395070	170164	136484	306658	76.92	78.57	77.62
1977	214812	183223	398035	176666	154795	331461	82.21	84.48	83.27
1982	330290	266163	596453	240422	203700	444122	72.75	76.53	74.46
1987	319529	262772	582301	266033	225878	491911	83.29	86.02	84.47
1988-89	320611	261805	582416	273574	225168	498742	85.55	86.01	85.63
1993	427450	387355	814805	387448	347489	734937	91.98	91.05	90.19
1998	136963	123683	260646	110462	95326	205788	80.65	77.07	78.95
2003	529517	485363	1014880	474181	417316	891497	89.56	85.98	87.84
2008	666391	635875	1302266	573021	549362	1122383	85.98	86.39	86.18
2013	603831	589553	1193384	541919	538968	1080887	89.09	91.33	90.57
2018	597281	579151	1176432	487832	498561	986393	81.68	86.08	83.85

Fig 3. Electors

Source: Election commission of India

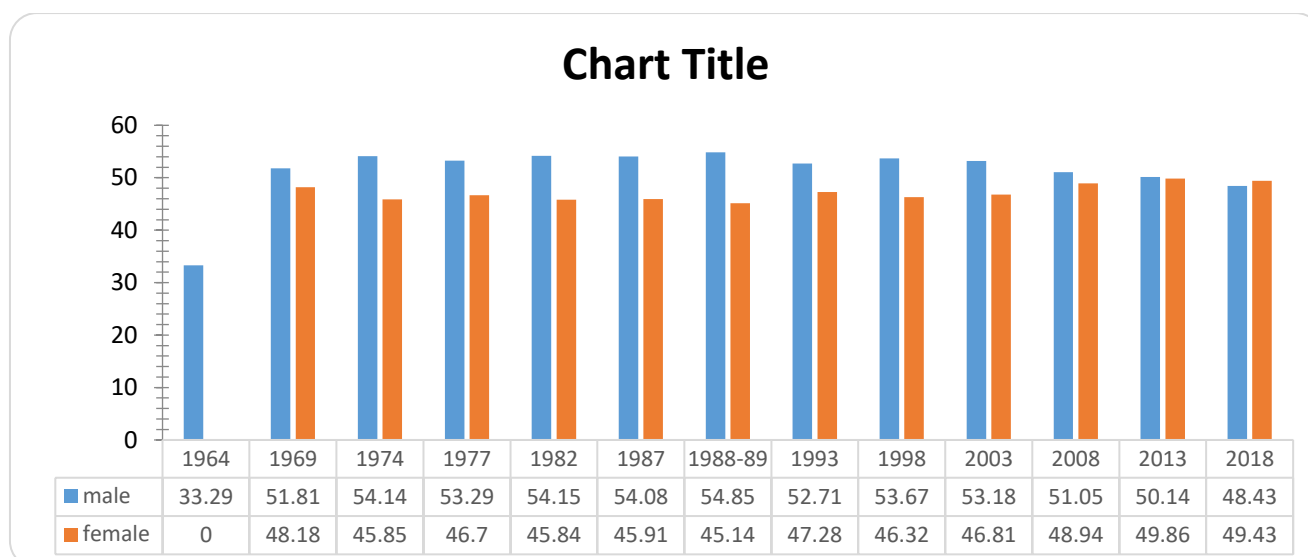


Fig. 4. Voter turnout percentage based on Gender.

Source: Election commission of India.

Year of election	Total seats contested	Total No of candidates	No of male candidates	No of female candidates	Percentage of women candidates	No of women elected
1964	40	73	73	Nil	-	
1969	40	144	142	2	1.39	Nil
1974	60	219	219	Nil	-	
1977	60	204	204	Nil	-	
1982	60	245	244	1	0.41	Nil
1987	60	214	211	3	1.40	Nil
1989	60	140	140	Nil	-	
1993	60	178	177	1	0.56	Nil
1998	60	80	80	Nil	-	
2003	60	225	222	3	1.33	Nil
2008	60	218	214	4	1.83	Nil
2013	60	187	185	2	1.07	Nil
2018	60	195	190	5	2.56	Nil
Total		2322	2301	21	0.90	Nil

Fig 5.Male/Female candidates in State Assembly.

Source: Election Commission of India

The high female voter turnout and the lack of women representation in the state have remained the topic of contention in the political arena. Some of the causes why high female voters' turnout has not necessarily lead to improving the political status of women are:

1. **Political culture:** Political debate and election campaigns have become increasingly nasty, confrontational, and uncivil. While most folks appear to be turned off by acrimony and incivility,(Mutz, and Reeves,; 2005.Mutz, 2007) and turn away good

potential candidates of all genders, it seems to affect women more. According to Miranda (2005) when asked if they would consider entering politics, i.e., becoming a candidate for an elected post in public office or being assigned to a decision-making role in government, many women, particularly in developing nations, say no. The corruption of public service for personal and narrow group interests has been the accepted norm in politics, where methods used to win elections and assume power include the illegal and unethical, and where corruption of public service for personal and narrow group interests has been the accepted norm. They claim that these dark elements of politics scare and endanger them, and that they will be persuaded to join as an entry fee into mainstream politics. Majority of women in Nagaland hold a similar viewpoint regarding politics, which deter women from entering into politics.

2. **Cultural barriers:** Many communities among the Naga tribes are still not open to women in politics. They view women as sentimental, emotional, fragile, gossipers ,etc, and do not possess the aptitude to survive in politics. Major section of society still hold a negative opinion towards the ability and capacity of women in politics. Further, politically active women are labeled as irresponsible, loose character, materialistic, etc. No doubt, character maligning of male politicians does take place on a regular basis but it does not to affect them much. Thus persistence of this cultural perception and stereotype, which are mostly negative acts as a barrier.

Naga women have achieved significant progress in terms of socio-economic status and enjoy greater freedom of choices and protection in society. However, in terms of political empowerment, they continue to face cultural barriers. Women appear to be their own worst adversaries when it comes to political growth and empowerment, particularly when they embrace long-held antiquated ideas and notions that politics is a filthy game played by males. (Douglas 2014)

3. **Not independent voters:** Most of the voters in Nagaland are hardly voting as autonomous individuals. They vote on clan

line, dictate of the community, village council, chief, etc. Women are disproportionately affected by this casting of "collective votes," as they are conspicuously missing, particularly in rural Nagaland. This might be interpreted as a lingering legacy, and a forceful remapping, of the ancient and unquestionably patriarchal system in which Naga women were mostly ignored in the political and public spheres, which were and were highly masculinist in form and function. Everyone can witness and analyse Naga women's persistent marginalisation in contemporary democratic politics (Wouters & Wijunamai 2019).Majority of them are just as participatory voters. However, to assume that if they are independent voters, they will vote for women is debatable and will require more research.

4. **Lack of strong female leadership:** Since statehood, 14 State Assembly elections have been conducted. Altogether 21 female contestants have stood for election with none being elected (Figure 5).According to the PRS Legislative Research Institute, Nagaland is the only state in India without a female MLA. The lack of strong female leaders in politics has contributed to the gender stereotype that politics is not for women. This stereotype view is not only among men but it is prevalent even among the majority of the women. Thus, even before a woman's leadership talents in politics are tested, it is widely acknowledged that women lack the requisite expertise to succeed in politics.(Moameren & Nieza 2021).
5. **Family work and time constraints:** Politics is a full-time profession. To be successful it demands time, money, and dedication. Women in our society spend significantly more time at home and have bigger responsibility in child care and household chores as a result of our social culture. Therefore when it comes to running for political office, women are at a disadvantage when compared to men. Women without the support of the families will never think of running for office, whereas men are likely to contest for election with or without the support of their families.
6. **Economic factor:** Women's socio-economic situation has a substantial impact on their ability to participate in and be

represented in political decision-making bodies. Shvedova (2005) contends that women's social and economic standing in society has a direct impact on their involvement in political institutions and elected bodies. In other words, one of the most significant barriers preventing more women from engaging in politics is a lack of financial means. Contesting election is an expensive affair and due to the patriarchal nature of the society, they do not have many claims over the resource of the parents, family, or clan resources. According to Razia Faiz, a former Member of Parliament from Bangladesh, financial resources are the most significant barrier to women's political engagement, and this is true even among Naga women.

7. **Self-imposed barriers:** There has been a general assumption that tradition, culture, and the patriarchal set up are the main barriers for lack of visibility of women in politics. However, the majority of women lack the confidence and enthusiasm to participate in politics. They shy away from politics and without taking an interest and being visible on the ground among the public one cannot expect to be endorsed during the election by the voters just based on their gender. Compared with that of men who are generally interested in politics and work towards contesting election beforehand.

8. **Role traditional political authorities:** The electoral process in Nagaland cannot be completed without an analysis of the role and influence of traditional political authorities. The authorities under traditional political institution like Chieftaincy in Sumi tribes and Putu Menden among the Ao tribes plays a very influential role in the selection and election of the candidates. A preliminary vote or pre-arranged agreement between village elders and political parties is held in a typical local village election scenario to choose consensus candidates to be backed by the entire village.(Amer, 2018) These influential council members will hardly endorse or support female candidates and without their endorsement, candidates whether male or female will hardly have a chance of winning the election

9. **Winnability of Candidates:** When we talk about political representation, we're talking

about the ability to represent the different interests of his or her constituency. Therefore, success in elections depends on winning the confidence of a major section of the people. Thus, the foremost quality for any candidates to contest an election is their winnability factor. Since most women shy away from politics due to external and self-barriers there is lack of visibility of female political leadership among the public, which does not create confidence regarding the leadership quality. This is also one of the reasons why political parties are hardly bothered to allocate party tickets to female candidates. Though based on data some argues of women outperform men candidates in terms of winnability percentages (Vidya Subrahmaniam 2016). However, they do not consider various determinants like party stronghold of the constituency, political culture of the region, political background of the female candidates, and other factors that are crucial for any candidates regardless of gender to win election in India. And looking at the political culture and the nature of election in Nagaland it will be hard for any political party to back a women candidate because more than party principles or ideology, candidates acceptability by the clan members, villagers, above all money power play a determining role for the candidates to be successful in the election.

3. Conclusion

In the last five decades, Nagaland has witnessed 13 State Assembly and 14 Lok Sabha Elections with consistent high voter turnout. However, high voter participation masks the true picture of election fraud, including proxy voting and booth capture. The principle of one-person-one-vote is virtually absent because of such malpractices. As was highlighted in the popular local post-Nagaland post (2019) "Despite low physical voter turnout, the overall percentage was reportedly high". Though the election commission has taken steps to ensure a fair election in the state, those measures are not being adequately implemented at the ground level, resulting in malpractices in every election. The continuation of such practices has led to low level of trust in the electoral process among the electorates in Nagaland. The persistence of such malpractices does not bode

well for democracy, and unless genuine actions are taken, democracy's quality will erode further.

In terms of women's representation in legislature, we tend to emphasize on equality of outcome or equity that is to provide equal representation to gender in proportion to their population. However, in the case of developing countries fulfilling particular quota for representation does not necessarily lead to empowerment of the masses. It depends on some extent on the socio-cultural of the region which is highlighted in the various studies on impact of 33% representation of women in the village Panchayati . In the case of Nagaland, mandatory 25% of women membership in the Village Development Board which came into force in 1979, despite that women's participation in the decision-making process in villages has remained relatively unchanged. No doubt without affirmative action like quota and reservation the phase of women participation in politics will be slow and it will take another three four decades to have any meaningful participation of women in politics. However, categorising women as a whole will be a mistake and may not also necessary lead to political empowerment of women in general. Since it is widely agreed that such privileges would mostly favour women from the top crust of society or those with a political background. As a result, women from lower socioeconomic strata, backward castes, and marginalised groups would be further disenfranchised from voting and sharing political power (Parveen 2011). Naga women have achieved their socio-economic empowerment over the years not based on quota but purely on their competence. Similarly, women will achieve true political empowerment when they demonstrate an interest in politics, band together as a group, and advocate for their needs, interests, and representation.

The poll of people contesting for election is only a small percentage, which Pareto termed as circulation of elites. They take risk, putting everything on the line to win election. Their success depends on their competence to navigate the various variable of vote bank politics. Of the 21 female contestant that stood for election over the years, Rakhila in 2008 and Awon Konyak came close to winning the election losing by a margin of 353 and 905 votes respectively(Election Commission of India).Therefore, it is wrong to assume that people are not voting for women candidates. People are voting for women candidates if they are able to make the right cord with the voters in their constituency. It is essential for the women candidates to be visible

and improve their winnability competence among the public instead of playing the gender card or depending on quota or reservation to win an election. In their goal for total empowerment, they can expect to confront opposition from some segments of society. In this sense, Tokheli Kikon, the chairperson of the Naharbari Village Council, is both an example and a lesson. She is the first and only woman to have ever held such an elected position in Nagaland, which includes over 1200 villages (Das 2019).

Taking into account the nature of our electoral process / political system without adoption of affirmative action like quotas it will take another 1-2 decades to have women representation in the State Assembly. However, more than focusing on equality of outcome through reservations, the focus should be more on sensitising and pressurising our representative to address the needs and interests of both the genders. Such an initiatives will led to adoption of inclusive policies regardless of which gender is at the helm of decision-making power.

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